

U.S. Will Avoid Inflaming Crisis, Bush Assures Gorbachev in Note

By MICHAEL R. GORDON

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 30 — President Bush has sent a letter to Mikhail S. Gorbachev appealing for a peaceful end to the Kremlin's dispute with Lithuania and assuring the Soviet President that the United States is "not trying to make things difficult" for either side in the Baltic conflict, the White House said today.

Mr. Bush's letter, which was sent late Thursday, was the first direct communication between the two leaders since the Lithuanian crisis broke out earlier this month. Commenting on the letter during a photo session at the White House today, Mr. Bush said, "I want to be sure that the Soviets understand our position, and understand that we're not trying to make things difficult for Lithuania or the Soviet Union or anyone else."

But the President's letter coincides with an Administration decision to postpone a trip to the Soviet Union by

the Army Chief of Staff, Carl E. Vuono, officials said today. And word of the letter came as Soviet soldiers occupied the prosecutor's office in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, and seized the plant that prints the main opposition newspaper.

The White House, which has declined to comment on daily developments in Lithuania, said today that it would have no comment on the Soviet Army's seizure of the prosecutor's office and the printing plant. "We have urged dialogue and we continue to urge dialogue," said Roman Popadiuk, a White House spokesman.

A Restrained Response

The moves by the Administration appeared to be an effort to encourage a nonviolent end to the confrontation between Lithuania and Mr. Gorbachev while fending off conservative criticism that the United States is being too conciliatory toward Moscow. Mr. Bush and his advisers have decided on a relatively restrained response to the crisis that avoids tough statements about the Kremlin's handling of the situation.

In postponing General Vuono's trip Mr. Bush is also seeking to avoid the possible embarrassment of having senior American Army officer visit the Soviet Union when Moscow might in

Continued on Page 6, Column 5



Reuters

Estonia yesterday approved a slower transition to independence than Lithuania's. Estonians rallied outside the Parliament on Thursday with signs declaring, "Lithuania has made its choice; now it's our turn!"

Continued From Page 1

pose harsh measures on Lithuania.

The President decided to send his letter, the text of which was not released, after meeting on Thursday with Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, who met with President Gorbachev in Moscow on Monday.

Senator Kennedy said he told President Bush that the Soviets were concerned that American criticism of Moscow's actions in Lithuania would undermine Mr. Gorbachev and that the Soviet leader seemed frustrated that he was not getting more understanding from the West.

Invitation From Soviet General

"The President replied that he was sympathetic but that Western understanding did not extend to the use of military force," Mr. Kennedy said.

White House officials said that the meeting with Senator Kennedy was one of a number of considerations in the President's decision to send the letter.

General Vuono was to have left for

Moscow this weekend on a trip planned at the invitation of Gen. Valentin K. Varennikov, commander of the Soviet ground forces that have recently gone to Vilnius to oversee Soviet military operations.

The much-heralded trip was to have been the first by an Army Chief of Staff to the Soviet Union since Gen. George C. Marshall went to the 1945 Yalta summit meeting.

Political Quandary for Bush

Administration officials said the postponement of General Vuono's trip was made at the highest levels of the American Government and reflected concern that the visit might be seen as sanctioning Mr. Gorbachev's actions in Lithuania.

The Russians were informed of the decision on General Vuono this afternoon, and the Administration did not announce the postponement. When asked about the decision, a Pentagon spokesman declined to explain the move, saying only, "It was felt that this would not be a good time for General Vuono's visit."

The Administration clearly finds itself in a political quandary over how to deal with the situation in Lithuania.

On the one hand the White House does not want to encourage the Lithuanians to take actions that might provoke a Soviet military crackdown, Administration officials said. Nor does it want to provoke Moscow into cracking down by appearing to dictate what President Gorbachev should do, officials said.

A crackdown, officials say, would jeopardize the improvement in American-Soviet relations and set back the process of political change in the Soviet Union.

"If we push the issue of self-determination too forcefully, that could kill not only chances of self-determination but could also kill the chances that the reform process will continue," an Administration official said.

On the other hand, the Administration does not want to be seen to be taking a weak approach or to be sanctioning repressive Soviet actions in Lithuania.

President Bush, who declined to discuss the specifics of his letter, said "I do not want to risk misunderstanding by failing to communicate."

Arrest of Lithuanian Soldiers

General Vuono's trip to Moscow, one of a series of exchanges between the American and Soviet military, had been eagerly awaited by Army officials. They saw the visit as an opportunity to learn about new changes in Soviet military strategy and forces and as a chance to reduce the possibility for misunderstanding between the sides.

But Army officials said they agreed with the decision to postpone the visit. On April 1, the Soviet Army is to call up conscripts throughout the Soviet Union, including 8,000 to 10,000 Lithuanians.

Many Lithuanian soldiers have deserted the Soviet Army in recent days as the republic's secession drive has gone forward. Soviet soldiers have been arresting the Lithuanian deserters, and the call-up raises the possibility of further conflict in the Baltic state. The presence of a ranking American general in Moscow during such a military crisis would be a serious embarrassment to the United States.

As the White House disclosed Mr. Bush's letter to Mr. Gorbachev, the Senate Republican Leader, Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, warned that "all bets are off" if Mr. Gorbachev resorts to force.